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ABSTRACT

Telecommunicated learning has been available since the 1930s, with the use of radio for instruction. Research has been conducted on its effectiveness, but little that focuses on the specifics of language learning. In the past two decades, language telecourses have proliferated and are used widely for adult education. This article reports on the experience with language telecourses at Catonsville Community College (Maryland), comparing the success of telecourse students (the number who earn a grade of "C" or better) to that of students in regular courses. More studies need to be conducted on the proficiency of telecourse students versus that of regular students. (Author)

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LANGUAGE TELECOURSES FOR ADULTS - PROS AND CONS

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Abstract

Telecommunicated learning has been available since the 1930s with the use of radio for instruction. Research has been conducted on its effectiveness, but little that focuses on the specifics of language learning. In the past two decades, language telecourses have proliferated and are used widely for adult education. This article reports on the experience with language telecourses at Catonsville Community College, comparing the success of telecourse students (the number who earn a grade of *C* or better) to that of students in regular courses. More studies need to be conducted on the proficiency of telecourse students versus that of regular students.

Introduction

When adult students meet in the college classroom, certain problems arise that can be handled well in a non-traditional setting, the language telecourse. First, no matter how carefully the college diagnoses new adults, they will arrive with a wide range of abilities and background. The instructor will be teaching potential honor students next to students with poor English skills, perhaps even learning disabilities. Moreover, the students themselves will recognize these differences and tend to compare their progress. The well-prepared may become impatient, while the less prepared will berate themselves for their apparent slowness. The individualized tutoring and flexible pacing in telecourses can diminish these two tendencies dramatically.

Secondly, attendance is often difficult for adults. Jobs, families and other obligations interfere with required weekly classes. The spotty attendance tends to undermine class morale, other students' as well as the instructor's. Strict rules don't seem to help, since the outside obligations are often real and cannot be avoided. In telecourses, attendance at class sessions can be optional without affecting the students' performance. Personal tutoring, by phone or in person, can be arranged with a minimum of inconvenience to student or instructor.

A third issue in language courses is the variety of needs of students with different learning styles. Some students require frequent contact with the teacher and the group. Others work more effectively on their own with minimal guidance. Likewise, some students require frequent oral feedback while others need written practice. In well-managed telecourses, teachers have the time and energy to use different approaches with different learners. In addition, some of the newer telecourses bombard the senses with a variety of stimuli. It would be impossible for one teacher to provide the same dazzling array of approaches.

Finally, teachers can emphasize different content areas to meet individual demands. For example, they can emphasize vocabulary for specific jobs or majors without taking class time from other students. Policemen, social workers, health professionals, and teachers can all benefit. Initially, telecourses require a lot of planning and preparation, but after the beginning stages, time is available for individualizing content.

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There are some disadvantages to teaching language by telecourse. Extra effort is needed during the preparation of exams, more than in traditional classes. Possibilities for misinterpretation increase with distance. The teacher must allow time for creating examples and proofreading for clarity. A second problem is the relatively high rate of attrition. Telecourse instructors in all disciplines experience a higher dropout rate than in regular courses, despite continued efforts to retain students. Third, not all colleges have the necessary support team and resources. Adequate media staff and services, a testing center with evening and weekend hours, cable hook-up and most of all, administrative support are necessary. Nevertheless, telecourses are worth the investment. They provide some adults with an opportunity they might not otherwise have.

What are Language Telecourses? How and Where are They Used?

Depending on the campus, state or country, the term "language telecourse" can mean a whole range of technological activities which seek to reach students at a distance. It may be as simple as the use of the phone and correspondence or as complex as interactive satellite communication. Some educators communicate with electronic mail via personal computers; others use two-way cable television.

Geographically, these techniques are being tried around the world. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has produced several language telecourses. The government of Germany used television to teach German to a heterogeneous immigrant population. The Central Broadcasting Television University of China has produced an English telecourse for Chinese citizens. TV Ontario has broadcast second language courses, especially French, since the 1970s.

Within the United States, numerous universities and public school systems have been experimenting with language telecourses. In the states of Iowa, Maryland Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah and Washington language telecourses have been broadcast by satellite. North Dakota and Missouri have offered a German by satellite program. The Montgomery County Public School System of Maryland has been using two-way television courses for its advanced placement or honors students in foreign languages. University College of the University of Maryland offers language telecourses. In fact, University College began offering an entire bachelor's program on cable television in 1991. Northern Virginia Community College offers language telecourses and the University of Virginia joins with other universities in the state to provide an array of satellite courses to rural students. Language telecourses have also been used to target special populations in the U. S., such as the survival Spanish course at Miami Dade Community College.

An early study of the effectiveness of a language telecourse was conducted at Iowa State University. The foreign language department with the help of curriculum committees evaluated the first few years of a televised German course, which used the *Guten Tag* series. They developed the course for two reasons: 1) to reach more foreign language students in order to increase enrollment and 2) to equate student proficiency in telecourses with that of on-campus students. They discovered that they had achieved their first objective, but not the second. After five years, between 1979 and 1984, the courses still had good enrollment, but the students did not demonstrate the same proficiency as on-campus students. Consequently, they added an additional semester of the telecourse to meet the college language proficiency requirement. They

also bolstered the support network for off-campus students, with better facilities at extension centers, frequent phoning and occasional class meetings. They were satisfied with these improvements but not with the oral testing procedures. They found their method of testing on the phone too time-consuming. They also found that all students were not equally prepared for oral testing since some were not purchasing the audiotapes. In a summary article in 1984, they concluded that the telecourse is good for reading and writing skills and adequate as revised to meet the language requirement. However, because of its limitations, they felt it should be made available *only* to those students who cannot attend campus classes. Their main recommendation to those who would use telecourses was to devote a great deal of time, i.e., time for preview and selection, for individualized tutoring and for orientation. They feel "one needs an extraordinary amount of time" for these tasks (Johnson and Van Iten 1984: 36).

The Iowa State experience with the language telecourse is similar to that of Catonsville Community College (CCC), though different in two areas. First, oral proficiency does not seem to suffer in the telecourse at CCC. In fact, listening comprehension as well as oral production is generally better in the French telecourse than in regular French classes. The immersion approach in the French telecourse *French in Action* (FIA)[1] does help. I do not notice the same oral skills in the Spanish telecourse. Pronunciation is more difficult for these students, though their listening and speaking skills are on a par with those of traditional Spanish students. It is interesting to note that the author of the German television series did not find lower proficiency in his telecourse students. The Iowa State team attributed this to the fact that "students were guided through the course daily by an instructor" (36). Assessing speaking skills is relatively easy with the student-made audiotapes. They simply mail or deliver the assigned tape, and the instructor can evaluate and correct the tapes within a week.

Secondly, the faculty time commitment need not be so extraordinary. Though the initial time needed is great for selection, preparation and adjustment, later it levels off into a manageable routine. After the first semester or two, the teacher can adjust to the spasmodic schedule during the semester and deal with it efficiently. Weekly guidance of students is possible and is generally sufficient.

A study on language telecourses in general was written by Soudack, a research consultant for TV Ontario. He looked at a number of sources, TV Ontario research reports as well as articles on second language learning and distance education, and described past offerings, made recommendations and posed a number of questions for consideration before development of a telecourse. Though he gave few conclusions about the effectiveness of telecourses and student proficiency, it is worthwhile to look at some of his descriptions and recommendations.

The description of enrollees in telecourses is similar to that at CCC, i.e., adults who need flexible scheduling with a mixed background in languages and a variety of needs. One of the characteristics differs from that of the typical CCC student: "highly educated in the upper reaches of the economic and occupational scales" (Soudack 1990: 4). CCC adults represent a range of educational backgrounds and are from varying occupational/economic levels.

Soudack recommended including grammar in the course because "adult students nearly always demand explicit instruction in grammatical rules" (1990: 6). He also stated that an immersion approach "is not practical for television" because "teaching on television requires at

least some English to orient the student" (1990: 7). Grammar can be included in the printed materials of the course to complement content of the videos. Experience with FIA demonstrates that immersion can be successful with adults. Though the videos use immersion, the FIA workbooks explain grammar in English as well as in French. Instructors can also provide grammar explanations in English as needed.

Soudack also looked at phone contact and concluded that it is not essential. Those that had a phone tutor available tended not to call, and the group without a tutor did not seem to miss the opportunity. Instructors usually find out early in the semester that some students count on phone calls while others prefer to work on their own. However, those that prefer phone calls claim they really help. In a few cases, the phone provides the only personal contact with a teacher.

Soudack believes there are two major problems with language telecourses: 1) the lack of oral feedback and practice in producing the language and 2) the attrition rate. He cites one study which shows as high as 50% drop-off (1990: 15). Phone conversations and student-produced audiotapes can solve the feedback problem. The group review sessions help as well. The frequent phoning and mailings throughout the semester have helped to minimize drop-off in CCC courses to 20% or less. Soudack believes that support services can reduce the dropout rate by half.

Some studies of distance learning in general are pertinent to language telecourses. Ohler lists a number of reasons in favor of general telecourses including: to overcome geographic isolation or disabilities which prevent coming onto campus, to resolve a schedule conflict, to escape tracking which may occur subconsciously in the classroom, for remediation, to reduce anxiety which occurs in the classroom, to reduce educational costs and finally to "take advantage of a world of experts and resources that only media can provide" (Ohler 1991: 33). The article is thought-provoking. It suggests that a number of social pressures can occur in the traditional classroom which impede learning. Whether one agrees or not with all of his reasons in support of distance learning, they do give a fresh view by treating distance learning as a new horizon rather than a second best recourse.

Overall, telecourses have several advantages over regular courses. First of all, they provide "educational equity" (Johnstone 1991: 50) "everyone is perceived on a similar basis regardless of physical handicaps, regional or national accents, usual assertiveness in face-to-face discussions, and other characteristics that would tend to put students on unequal footing in the usual classroom setting" (1991: 57). Secondly, extra funds are not needed for teachers or classroom space. Third, and most important, student proficiency after the telecourses, is not weaker than that of students in regular courses. In fact, a teacher of the learning disabled observed that her students were able to pay closer attention to the television than to a live teacher (Johnstone 1991: 56). Another professor claimed his students achieved a higher level of critical thinking in his interactive English television course (1991: 56).

There are no significant conclusions about the effectiveness of telecourses in different content areas. Just because a math telecourse may be successful does not mean a language telecourse will be. More research needs to be conducted on the effectiveness of telecourses so that the appropriate media, instructional strategies and support can be selected in each discipline and so that teachers can be trained adequately.

Overall, the greatest criticisms of language telecourses focus on 1) the lack of face-to-face, live interaction and 2) a related concern, the possible overreliance on technology. Even those most committed to distance learning warn that language teachers should not treat technology as a "quick fix" (Jones 1989) for classroom problems. These are wise warnings to those who would develop language telecourses. Courses without feedback, communication and for the gregarious students, bonding, go against the very nature of language, which is human interaction. Likewise, students with challenging learning problems cannot resolve them completely in a telecourse.

At CCC, the content of the language telecourse is provided in video lessons from various producers. We have used *Zarabanda* from the BBC and are currently using *Conversemos* as beginning Spanish courses. For beginning French, we have always used *French in Action (FIA)* Students watch the videos (one half hour lesson per week) via county cable in their homes, or they watch or, in certain cases, check out the videos in our library media center. The French course includes audiotapes which the students purchase and use at home or in the media center. Class meetings are scheduled on Saturdays to practice communication with a live teacher and to review for the scheduled exams. The students are evaluated on the basis of four written exams and on audiotapes which the students create by recording themselves. They take the exams at their convenience in the college testing center, and they mail or deliver the audiotapes. The chronology in Table 1 gives a history of telecourses at CCC.

Table 1

Language Telecourses at Catonsville Community College (CT, VC) and at Carroll College (WZ)

Spring 1986	-	Spanish 101 CT - *Zarabanda, Beginning Spanish,* 4th edition, by David Curland, University of Oregon (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1982) to accompany BBC's Spanish language videos
Fall 1986	-	Spanish 101 CT - *Zarabanda*
Spring 1987	-	Spanish 101 CT - *Zarabanda*
Fall 1987	-	French 101 CT, WZ - *French in Action*, 1st edition, by Pierre J. Capretz and Barry Lydgate (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987)
Spring 1988	-	French 102 CT, WZ - *French in Action* Spanish 101 CT, WZ - *Zarabanda*
Fall 1988	-	French 101 CT, VC, WZ - *French in Action*
Spring 1989	-	French 102 CT, VC, WZ - *French in Action*
Fall 1989	-	French 101 CT, VC, WZ - *French in Action*
Spring 1990	-	French 102 CT, VC, WZ - *French in Action*
Fall 1990	-	French 101 CT, VC, WZ - *French in Action*
Spring 1991	-	French 102 CT, VC, WZ - *French in Action* Spanish 101 CT, VC - *Conversemos, Let's Talk*, 1st edition, by Carlos Z. Gomez and Janet R. Hafner, Palomar Community College of Coast Community College District (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1988), distributed by Coast Telecourses
Fall 1991	-	French 101 CT, VC, WZ - *French in Action* Spanish 101 CT, VC, WZ - *Conversemos*

Adult Learners at Catonsville

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The traditional beginning language class at CCC is filled with diverse students. They are diverse in terms of preparation for a college language course, of ability to attend, of learning style and of expectations from the course. It is difficult, if not impossible in some cases, for instructors to satisfy all of the learning needs in the class. They spend a good deal of the semester revising lesson plans, altering the pace and using class time to talk to individuals about personal needs in the course.

The different levels of preparation are a common phenomenon in post-high school courses.[2] Loughrin-Sacco (1990) investigated the effects of integrating true beginners and false beginners in language classes. He noted that a national survey by Klee and Rogers (1989) showed that on the average 57% of students in beginning language classes had already had one year or more of the language in high school. Some classes had as many as 92% false beginners! Based on two studies at Michigan Technological University, Loughrin-Sacco described the anxiety that the true beginners underwent in class, their hesitation to speak and their slow and difficult progress. The false beginners, on the other hand, often enrolled in the course for an "easy A" (1990: 91). They tended to achieve this objective, raise their Q.P.A. and boast about it. This led to what Loughrin-Sacco called "the intimidation factor" (1990: 94), a painful obstacle for true beginners.

At CCC, such experiences are particularly difficult for adults. One way to avoid the problem is to encourage false beginners to earn credit by exam. However, this incentive is frequently not enough or, in some cases, inappropriate for false beginners and they continue to enroll in elementary courses.

Additionally, in the ideal class, where all of the students have basic skills for college courses, they inevitably respond to the material at vastly different levels. During oral communication, when performance is especially obvious, some respond quickly and easily; others have difficulty just repeating. This may have little to do with academic background or with intelligence. In an adult classroom, different response levels can hinder learning. The slower students tend to blame themselves and drop the course yet the faster students become bored when the instructor slows down or repeats material.

A second characteristic of the community college students is that it is often difficult for them to attend every class. Absenteeism due to sickness is compounded by problems with transportation, employment and a dependent family. Most community college students pay their own educational expenses, as well as their lodging, transportation and family bills. Excuses for absences are often legitimate. Nevertheless, the absenteeism undermines the morale of those who do attend. They view frequent make-up work as an unfair advantage, and the teacher spends extra class time repeating material.

A third characteristic of adults is their wide range of individual learning styles. Recently, teacher workshops have emphasized the need to teach with methods that appeal to students with varying preferences (Babcock 1991). There has been at least one study of the relationship of personality and success in telecourses (Scanlon 1985). Other attempts have been made to profile the personality types of students who succeed in language courses (Kanigel 1988). All of the research on style is pertinent to the community college classroom, where diversity is so great. Some of the differences are not a result of skill level, but must be attributed to personalities and

learning style. The learning process is more complex when a teacher's personal style conflicts with that of some of her students (Oxford, Ehrman, Lavine 1990).

Fourth, adult students often have differing expectations of a course. The profiles in Tables 2 through 5 illustrate this. While many enroll in French and Spanish courses because of their language background, others list specific reasons for taking the course, involving various career or personal expectations. The reasons in the table are taken almost verbatim from surveys the students fill out at the beginning of the semester.

Table 2
Summary Profile - Students in Regular Classes - Fall 1990

FRENCH 101

	Language Background			Reasons for Taking Course
	French	Other	None	
1)		X*		
2)	X*			
3)	X*			
4)	X*	X		Love languages; review
5)	X*	X		
6)		X*		
7)	X*	X		
8)	X*	X		Love languages; review
9)	X*			Want to be translator
10)			(X)	(Failed French, 9th grade)
11)	X*			
12)	X*			Want to speak French
13)		X*		
14)	X*			
15)	X*			Interested in languages
16)	X*			Review
17)		X*		
18)	X*			
19)	X*	X		
20)	X*			
21)	X*			
22)	X*			
23)	X*			
24)	X*			

* Earned C or better this semester
◯ Less than C this semester

X • Denotes feature

Table 3
Summary Profile - Students in Regular Classes - Fall 1990.

SPANISH 101

	Language Background			Reasons for Taking Course
	Spanish	Other	None	
1)		X*		Former nun; already tutors English & Latin; wants to tutor Spanish
2)		X*		13 years old, special admission; interested
3)			(X)	
4)	X*			
5)			X*	
6)	(X)	X		Father from Dom. Rep.
7)	X*	X		Puerto Rican descent
8)	X*			Want to speak to Hispanic friends
9)	X*	X		
10)	X*			
11)		X*		
12)	X*			
13)		X*		Want to speak Spanish
14)		X*		
15)		(X)		
16)		X*		Required for PhD., Hopkins
17)		X*		
18)	X*			Girlfriend from Puerto Rico
19)	X*	X		
20)	X*			
21)	X*			Review
22)		X*		Want to learn correctly
23)		(X)		Enjoyment
24)	X*			To speak Spanish fluently
25)	X*	X		Hispanic friends
26)		X*		
27)	X*	X		Elementary Education major
28)	X*			Intern. bus. major
29)	X*			
30)	X*			
31)	X*			
32)	(X)			
33)	X*			To bec. int. accountant
34)		X*		
35)	X*			
36)	X*			Portuguese roots; to study similar language
37)	X*			
38)	X*			
39)	X*	X		Travel; to bec. interpreter
40)	X*			Like Spanish
41)	X*	X		Portuguese father
42)			(X)	Hosted exchange student

* Earned C or better this semester
(O) Less than C this semester

X Denotes Feature

Table 4
Summary Profile - Students in Telecourses - Fall 1990

FRENCH 101

	Language Background			Reasons for Taking Course
	French	Other	None	
1)		Ⓧ		Opera; love languages
2)	X*			Enjoy; work full-time; baby
3)	Ⓧ			Need credit; like French
4)		Ⓧ		Senior citizen; travel; credit
5)	X*			Requirement
6)	X*			Enjoy; help son with homework
7)		X*		Soc. Stud. teacher; PhD. History; enjoy
8)	X*			Cajun roots
9)	X*	X		Review; enjoy
10)		X*		Naval reserves, full-time job & family; grad. req.; interest
11)	X*	X		Graduation requirement
12)			X*	Daughter took it; interest
13)	Ⓧ			Love languages; to speak French
14)	X*			Full-time job; for credit; to become fluent
15)	X*	X		Full-time job; hosts exchange students
16)	X*			Req. for major; schedule; likes individual in TV course
17)	X*	X		From Africa; likes lang.
18)	X*			Towson St. req.; travel
19)	X*	X		Schedule (job); repeat high school French; car accident (can't attend reg. classes); enjoy
20)	X*	X		Full-time businessman; for degree, travel, fluency

* Earned C or better this semester
Ⓧ Less than C this semester

X Denotes feature

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Table 5
Summary Profile - Students in Telecourses - Spring 1991

SPANISH 101

	Language Background			Reasons for Taking Course
	Spanish	Other	None	
1)			X*	Graduation requirement; review; 7 mo. pregnant; busy with Cub Scouts
2)	X*			Review
3)	X*			To become fluent
4)	X*			Transfer requirement
5)	(X) (Became ill during sem.)			
6)			X*	Enjoyment; grad. req.
7)	X*			Enjoyment
8)		X*		Review before 102; grad. req., full-time police officer
9)			X*	Works full-time; to speak Spanish to friends
10)		X*		Interest
11)	X*	X		Enjoyment
12)	X*			B.A. req., never understood well before
13)		(X)		Works full-time; travel
14)		X*		Works full-time Holiday Inn; hospitality management major
15)	X*(C)			English teacher (used to teach French); enjoyment; for teaching other courses cancelled; need for full-time schedule; enjoyment
16)	X*			Full-time airline stewardess; for passengers
17)		X*		interest; needed one more course
18)		X*		Full-time social worker; interest
19)	X*			Fiance from Mexico; will be married in Mexico
20)	(X)	X		Interest
21)	X*			full-time job
22)			X*	Moving to Spain
23)	X*			Need elective; interest
24)	X*	X		Full-time police officer; grad. req.
25)		X*		Requirement; parental pressure
26)	X*			International business Major

* Earned C or better this semester
(C) Less than C this semester

X Denotes feature

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The students list requirements (for A. A. degree or transfer), careers, travel, friends, family, or review as their reasons. Those that have studied languages before mention their "love of languages" and their desire "to speak fluently." The telecourse students mention the same array of reasons as the traditional students, but they tend to add information about personal schedule problems and pressing career or family obligations.

Language Telecourses - Pros

The problems that arise in classes of students with mixed skill levels can be handled humanely and effectively in telecourses. Educators have noted that telecourses are good for mixed levels. Demaray noted that the telecourse, *French in Action (FIA)* "is a marvelous program for students of all and many, varying language abilities, the talented and the less talented" (Hodgson 1991: 7). Anglin found that FIA can be used to train teachers of different levels: "The people whose French was much better never got bored with it, and they learned to use it in their classrooms, and the people who were very unsure about their French were able to learn more of the language. The teachers were accomplishing different goals with the same materials" (Hodgson 1991: 2). Ohler suggested that distance learning may be a good way for a student "to escape tracking," whether conscious or unconscious, on the part of the teacher (1991: 29). The human biases that can naturally occur in regular classes of mixed levels do not develop as easily in the objective environment of distance learning.

In telecourses, true beginners do not experience the same anxiety because they do not have to perform in front of their peers. Initially, they use the video and audio tapes on their own, privately if desired. They can also record the videos and watch them over and over. Then they are encouraged to call their instructor with any questions and to set up phone/office tutoring. In these sessions, the instructor can repeat, reassure and slow down as much as necessary without taking time from the other students. By the time the group meets for a review session, the beginners have had the most contact with the instructor and can perform with more confidence.

One may well ask how the instructor can spare the time necessary for so many individual phone and office visits. This is generally not a problem. Researchers have noted that in telecourses "significant proportions (often the majority) of the audiences were not true beginners" (Soudack 1990: 4). This is true at CCC. Therefore there is proportionally more time to devote to the true beginners than in a regular course where there are (both nationally and at CCC) not quite as many false beginners.

Another question may be: Is this good for the false beginners? After all, they are paying students as well and deserve a good educational experience as long as they are not inhibiting the others. At CCC, the answer is an emphatic **yes**. The false beginners learn to use their resources and to work independently whenever they can. If they falter, they are welcome to use the instructor to help them review. The difference is that they don't have to slow down when they don't need to. They can work at their own pace and concentrate solely on their own weak spots. When these students call, they tend to ask precise questions. Some of these students can achieve an even higher level in the telecourse than in regular courses (see Lambert 1991: 7).

The second problem of adult learners, attendance, can also be handled more effectively with telecourses. The videos, phone and correspondence can replace campus meetings, if necessary.

For example, adults who work overtime or are undergoing medical treatment can succeed in the course as long as they can take the four exams and mail in audiotapes. Though face-to-face contact with the instructor is encouraged, it is sometimes impossible. Nevertheless, all students can still receive tutoring.

In addition, the morale of the rest of the class is not affected by attendance. Nor is student lateness, a perennial source of irritation to teachers and to fellow students, a problem in telecourses. Finally, students who "shop" for courses the first week of classes (despite our advisement efforts) will not disrupt the progress of the class in a telecourse.

Administrators at colleges share another concern, cost. It is difficult to fund language offerings when the enrollment figures are not strong. Lambert notes, as many of us do, that the demand for language courses *is* strong if we can just make them more accessible to the general public (Lambert 1991: 3). Attracting adults into the individualized, off-campus telecourse may be a good method of bringing them eventually on the campus. At Lakewood Community College, administrators have noted that adult learners tend to prefer off-campus settings as an entry point into college courses (Pike and Oelschlager 1991: 1).

Another feature of telecourses is that students on several campuses can be taught by one instructor. The cost of teacher salary is reduced as well as that of classroom space, utilities, services and supplies. Campus parking expenses are also reduced.

Students whose learning styles conflict with that of the teacher or the traditional textbook have more freedom in the telecourse. Telecourses are in a sense team-taught. The teachers on the video and the local, live teacher work together. If the local teacher is not a native speaker, a telecourse package can be selected that uses one or more native speakers in the video presentations. If the local teacher prefers one approach to the material, such as grammar-translation, the multimedia package of the telecourse will offer the student an array of approaches (audio, visual, verbal, written, immersion, etc.), all of which present and reinforce the same material. Some students in my courses prefer to watch the videos over and over; others play the audio whenever possible (in the car, the kitchen, the office). Likewise, some students concentrate on the written exercises, others on the English explanations. Further, some students call and visit frequently, others view the teacher as a "mother hen" and enjoy their independence. Despite vast differences in personality and learning style, all motivated students can succeed, i.e., pass the written exams and perform reasonably well orally (on the phone, at review sessions and on their tapes).

As for the traditional textbook, experts agree that we need to start routinely using multimedia packages for language courses. Rivers urges that every possible medium and modality be used to aid learning. Schulz makes the same recommendation, that we supplement the traditional textbook with every possible medium in foreign language courses. In small departments with limited staff and funding, the language telecourse is a good start in this direction.

Another concern, both abroad and in the U.S., has been the cultural authenticity of materials (see Kelling and Niedzielski 1987). Both Lambert (1991) and Schulz (1990) agree that the materials used in distance learning are often more culturally accurate than the single textbook. Subtle communication through gestures, facial expressions, or postures can be conveyed through

video. Changing settings such as furnishings, fashion and street scenes can be shown as well. Though stereotyping can occur in videos, the latest productions emphasize the variety and dynamism of living cultures.

Finally, it is a little easier for the instructor to satisfy students' expectations in a telecourse. Students with particular professional needs can borrow vocabulary lists, readers and specialized books (for business, health or law enforcement professions). The teacher can also include special phrases at the end of phone conversations without taking time from the other students.

For students who express the broad goal "to speak fluently," there have been some interesting results in the immersion course, FIA. Even though the students attend class less, they are still able to respond as well as traditional students. They are also able to record short paragraphs with good pronunciation and sentence structure for their audiotape assignments. I believe that this is the result of less peer pressure and more individualized attention as well as the immersion approach of FIA.

Language Telecourses - Cons

Language telecourses are not perfect, and I do not wish to promote them as the panacea for the ills of the language classroom. First of all, more teacher time is required initially than for the average language course. The teachers may need to devote part of a summer or some vacation time, if they work full-time. Syllabi, hand-outs, and correspondence must contain every detail in case the student cannot reach the teacher with questions. Exams require more attention. Testing strategies and examples that are clear in regular classes may not be clear on telecourse exams. Questions that arise (about format, etc.) cannot be answered during the exam. More time is required for preparation, not only in the beginning, but also during the semester. Busy and slow times are not as predictable. There may be a long waiting period between mailings and exams and then an avalanche of calls and visits. It may also be difficult for teachers to hold review sessions at non-traditional times, on evenings or weekends.

Further, it takes time for teachers to adjust to the non-traditional approaches of telecourses. In the first course, they may need just as much time as the students to adjust to using the video and audiotapes simultaneously with the printed materials. The first time they teach a telecourse, teachers will have to learn how much time should be spent on each and what are the most efficient procedures. The rhythm and sequence of content is also apt to be different. The instructor who is accustomed to teaching present tense conjugations first may be thrown by the telecourse which uses familiar commands first. Before reassuring students, teachers will need to become comfortable with the materials themselves. Watts noted that "it takes one semester to fully acclimate yourself to its novelty" (1990: 35).

A second problem is that attrition is higher in telecourses than in regular courses. This is a big drawback at community colleges, where attrition in regular courses is already a major concern.

Finally, dealing with students with borderline language skills in their first language is a bit more difficult in telecourses. Though students send written profiles at the beginning of the course, they often arrive late or are hard to diagnose before the course refund period is over. Sometimes

a student who can't read or write well escapes the instructor's attention until it is too late. As the counselors and instructors improve advisement procedures, these students may be diagnosed sooner so they can enroll in the proper basic skills course before taking a language. The only advantage with the telecourse is that these students do not hold up the others, nor are they subject to undue embarrassment in front of a regular class.

Pros and Cons in Language Telecourses - Are They Successful?

At CCC, the retention or success rate (based on a grade of D or better in all telecourses) has improved since 1985 (from 57% to 62% in 1991), but it is still lower than the rate in regular courses (Sneed 1991). In language telecourses, the success rate (based on a grade *C* or better) is higher and comparable to the relatively good retention in regular language courses. Table 6 indicates the number of students out of the class total who earned less than *C* versus those who earned a higher grade. These numbers are then listed as percentages.

Table 6
Attrition Versus Success* - Regular Versus Telecourses - 1990 to 1991

	Less than C/Drops	C or Better
Regular Courses		
French 101 A:	1/24 - 4%	23/24 - 96%
Spanish 101 A and B: **	6/42 - 14%	36/42 - 86%
Telecourses		
French 101 CT:	3/7 - 43%	4/7 - 57%
French 101 VC:	1/11 - 9%	10/11 - 91%
French 101 WZ:	0/2 - 0%	2/2 - 100%
French 101 CT, VC, WZ - Combined Total:	4/20 - 20%	16/20 - 80%
Spanish 101 CT:	2/17 - 12%	15/17 - 88%
Spanish 101 VC:	1/9 - 11%	8/9 - 89%
Spanish 101 CT, VC, Combined Total:	3/26 - 12%	23/26 - 88%

* Success defined as a final grade of C or better in the course. (Auditors or students who never took first exam are not included.)

** A and B represent course sections for traditional classes, CT, VC, WZ for telecourses (see Table 1).

The relative success of language courses may be due to the fact that they are smaller than lecture or other college courses. The instructor can therefore give more attention to potential dropouts.

Table 7 gives similar percentages, but it compares the success rate of true versus false beginners in regular and telecourses. The French telecourse appears to be a difficult course for true beginners, though the students in the Spanish telecourse did even better than their counterparts in regular courses. This would suggest that the choice of language and the approach used are large factors in the success of true beginners. True beginners should therefore be advised

carefully about the course they choose in a telecourse. Also, since the French telecourse uses immersion, true beginners should be advised and monitored closely in a course with this approach.

Table 7
Attrition Versus Success* - Regular Versus Telecourses - True Beginners Versus False Beginners

1990 to 1991

	No Prior Language		Some French or Spanish	
	Less than C	C or Better	Less than C	C or Better
Regular Courses				
French 101 A:				
0/5 - 0%	5/5 - 100%		1/19** - 5%	18/19 - 95%
Spanish 101 A and B:***				
4/17- 24%	13/17 - 76%		2/25 - 8*%	23/25 - 92%
Telecourses				
French 101 CT, VC, WZ:				
2/5 - 40%	3/5 - 60%		2/15 - 13%	13/15 - 87%
Spanish 101 CT, VC:				
1/12 - 8%	11/12 - 92%		2/14 - 14%	12/14 - 86%

* Success defined as a final grade of C or better in the course.
** Even though this student had studied French before, she had failed the earlier course.
*** A and B represent course sections for traditional classes, CT, VC, WZ for telecourses (see Table 1)

Another consideration for the success of telecourses is the network of support services available. The college will need adequate library/media staff to supply and supervise tapes. A telecourse director should be appointed to handle licensing with telecourses producers and to oversee technical services. The director will also need to work out an agreement with the county cable system, so that off-campus students can watch videos at home. A college testing center is essential with flexible hours both evenings and weekends. The mail room will need to be able to deal promptly with large mailings. The registration office should be equipped to take phone/mail-in registration and to provide address labels by computer several times during the semester. Most of all, there should be administrative support for telecourses.[3]

Individual colleges, as well as consortia of colleges, routinely evaluate their language telecourses with student surveys and curriculum committees. However, little research has been done which systematically compares student progress in language telecourses versus that in regular courses. There have been a few college studies, yet the technology used varies so widely that it is hard to draw conclusions about student proficiency. The amount of interaction and the kinds of testing vary greatly as well. If, as Lambert suggested, we face a strong demand for distance learning of languages, then professionals will need to share their successes and failures as much as possible so that high quality standards can be applied.

More research is needed which compares student proficiency to that in regular courses. Lambert indicated (1991: 8)

> Our research needs to be much more carefully targeted. Few studies are concerned with specific aspects of the teaching-learning process, fewer still with the pedagogical aspects of distance education, let alone with respect to foreign language instruction, and almost none with the important question of how can we go beyond where we are now in both distance learning in foreign language teaching and the relationship of distance learning to the rest of foreign language instruction.

He added that "distance education operates in a sort of educational ghetto in foreign language instruction" because of the lack of research (1991: 36).

Conclusion

In my opinion, language telecourses are worth the effort. However, I agree with Lambert that they should continue as a "controlled experiment" (Lambert 1991: 7) until we have more data on specifics. Assuming that students can attain equivalent proficiency in a telecourse, what technology, what procedures, what support services work best? How much interaction is essential? Will a video or a digitized computer voice do or will some students require live interaction? How can testing be made more comprehensive without being too time-consuming for the teacher? Can proficiency be assessed more accurately?

Even after more research and fine tuning, I do not believe that the telecourses should be the *only* courses available at a college. Students should have the option of taking on-campus courses whenever possible. The telecourses are a good alternative for students who need individual attention or prefer independent learning. They are also the best (and only) alternative for students with difficult schedules or for those who cannot get to the campus regularly. Additionally, they can help administrators cut down on campus facility costs. The core of the foreign language program, however, should be based on a curriculum of on-campus courses, where students interact with teachers every day. This is vital not only for the students, but for the teachers, who can teach distant students more effectively when they are aware of students' daily needs.

As long as they are not central to the program, telecourses can be a fine option for adults. They can use the courses to suit their varied needs, to learn a language at their own pace, or to substitute for campus classes that are not convenient.

Endnotes

1. Since its release in 1987, FIA has been highly praised for its innovations and cultural authenticity. For example, teachers claim that they are able to use more spoken French than in other courses. Also, some claim that it helps develop writing skills. Some use it to teach all ages; others use it as a teacher refresher course. Sole full-time faculty find it like team teaching with teachers in France.

2. Another problem at the community college is the lack of skills in English at the entry level. Despite efforts to reach borderline students prior to registration, many still manage to enroll in language courses that need to work on their skills in English. Numerous spelling and punctuation errors are not uncommon, errors that trace back to a lack of writing ability in English or in another first language. Occasionally, there is a student who cannot create a sentence or read the English explanations in the textbook. We have recently instated a basic prerequisite in English (Reading 101), but it has served only to reduce the problem, not eliminate it.

3. At CCC, we are fortunate to have both an Associate Dean who supports our efforts and a Coordinator of Telelearning who manages all telecourses. In addition, we have an Instructional Staff, including Division Heads and deans, that believes that telecourses are a legitimate portion of faculty load. Without this support, the endeavor would not be possible. This assistance leaves language faculty free to preview, to ensure quality courses and to tend to student needs.

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Appendix

Tips for Telecourses

1. Advise students carefully about telecourses. They are not for everyone.
2. Offer them as an alternative to a solid core of on-campus courses.
3. Allow extra preparation time initially, perhaps release time during the semester or during the summer.
4. Try to be flexible with office and class review hours. Use faculty who can work evenings or weekends.
5. Allow extra time for proofreading/revising exams during semester. Make sure they contain clear examples and are based on the assigned exercises.
6. Provide study guides which highlight important material for exams.
7. Allow extra time on days when material must be mailed or phone contacts are necessary.
8. Personalize notes on handouts and exams.
9. Record personal messages as well as corrections on student-produced audiotapes.
10. Try to establish rapport with students during phone calls. Allow extra time to review together or go over workbook exercises.
11. Take a field trip during the semester. It may be a good opportunity for telecourse students to meet campus students. Include friends and family.
12. Mail announcements of pertinent events (club activities, films, museum exhibits) with other materials.

Student Evaluations

The student evaluations I have are for the years 1988 through 1990. The instructor is rated on the following criteria:

1. The instructor clearly explains the course objectives and requirements in the written course materials.
2. The instructor clearly explains grading practices, in the written course materials.
3. The instructor's grading is fair.
4. The instructor's on-campus classes are well planned and organized.
5. The instructor is actively involved in helping me succeed in my telecourse.
6. The instructor is open to questions and differing opinion.
7. The instructor's tests and assignments are graded and returned in a reasonable period of time.
8. The textbooks and handouts are helpful for learning.
9. The instructor's assignments are reasonable and worthwhile.
10. The instructor makes helpful comments on assignments, papers, and examinations.
11. The instructor is prompt in returning phone calls.
12. The instructor is available for questions and discussion.
13. The instructor cares about the student's progress.
14. The instructor seems to know the subject matter.

In one of the first telecourses in the fall of 1988, there were high marks in all areas, except #1. In subsequent semesters, there were high marks in all categories, until the spring of 1990, when there was a low mark in #8. Unfortunately, these evaluations are not statistically conclusive, because some students did not fill out the evaluations and the classes were small during those semesters. (Though enrollment is up now, we are still working on efficient ways to collect all the student evaluations.) Nevertheless, they were useful. The weak areas have been improve: orientation, syllabus and handouts.

Catonsville also uses an open-ended form for student evaluation in which students can write any comments they wish, anonymously. The responses referred to here are from 1989 and 1990. They are all evaluating the first semester of the *French in Action* course. Comments in favor of the course praise the instructor, the individual attention from the instructor, the flexible scheduling, the convenience of home viewing, the FIA videos, the live classes, the instructor's extra activities (concerning a field trip and holiday celebrations in France) and the exams. Comments criticizing the course noted poor quality county cable broadcasts (in another county which had a newer cable system), poor quality audiotapes (probably due to errors in copying), the speed of the audiotape drills (too fast!), the lack of explanation in English on the audiotapes, the difficulty for true beginners and the relative lack of interaction with fellow students. The most frequently favored component was the instructor; the most frequently criticized was the FIA audiotapes. These results would lend credence to the conclusion of researchers that personal contact is one of the most important elements in the telecourse.

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